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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the pragmatic success and failure of requests when expressed in Portuguese or in English. Subjects were 40 college students who were administered a discourse-completion instrument in 2 versions (English and Portuguese) comprised of 10 situations, or 5 pairs in which each pair was related to a different social situation. Situational factors considered included: relative dominance of requester and hearer; relative social distance; hearer's degree of obligation in carrying out the request; speaker's degree of right in issuing the request; degree of difficulty of speaker in making the request; and likelihood of compliance. Analysis of responses looked at three levels of directness of request (impositives, conventionally indirect, and hints), use of internal modifiers that either soften or intensify the request, and perspective taken. Results are presented and analyzed separately for Portuguese and English. It was found that Portuguese-speakers and English-speakers show little agreement in the proportion of different strategies used in different situations, although they did agree that some situations required certain strategies. It was also found that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) take an intermediate position between native Portuguese-speakers and native English-speakers when using more direct strategies and closer to English when using conventional ones. (MSE)

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Request Realization Patterns in Portuquese and EFL

Maria Luiza Baethgen Oliveira

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REQUEST REALIZATION PATTERNS IN PORTUGUESE AND EFL

Maria Luiza Baethgen Oliveira[1]

INTRODUCTION

"Close the window, please". For a number of years I wondered how a professor who is a native speaker of English would react to a request like this from a student. I mention this because requests of this kind are frequently heard by teachers of English at almost every level he might be teaching. It must be said that our academic environment is rather informal if compared to that of other countries, but this would never justify a request like that when uttered in English. Why then is our students' requesting behaviour, even when they are proficient in other aspects of the language, still distant from that of the native speaker?

This paper discusses request realization patterns in Brazilian Portuguese, in its southern variety, and in English as a foreign language in five different social contexts. Its goal is to verify if the patterns used by Brazilian learners of English are closer to those of their native language or to those of the target language and, if not, why.

Speech act realizations are permeated of social implications. Also, interactional styles vary and this variation creates different expectancies and interpretations, as a result, failure in capturing these styles and implications may cause the speaker serious ruptures in his communication.

The foreign language teacher knows very well of the difficulties involved in correcting social-pragmatic failure which derives from a diverse evaluation of social-cultural aspects such as social distance, degree of formality, of imposition, etc. And requests being such face-threatening acts my choice has rested upon them.

Instances of pragmatic failure by language learners ask most properly for discussion and not just correction by the teacher, so my intention with this paper has been mainly to equip and alert teachers in this respect. It is important that the foreign speaker learn not just how to make polite requests in the target language but to make them according to his intention. Also, up to the moment when this research was carried out, nothing, to my knowledge, had been done in terms of investigating speech acts in Brazilian Portuguese.

METHOD

There were forty informants, all learners of English half way through their undergraduate studies, with sufficient knowledge of the language--without which it would have been impossible to assess pragmatic awareness.

The instrument used in the investigation was a discourse completion test in two versions--English and Portuguese--which presented ten situations, or five pairs where each pair was related to a different social context. Five of the situations were the same used by the **Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project.**[2] The social parameters taken into account followed those chosen by Blum-Kulka and House in **Cross-Cultural and Situational Variation in Requesting Behavior** (1989) and are:

1--The relative dominance of the requester relative to the hearer.
2--The relative social distance between the interlocutors.
3--The hearer's degree of obligation in carrying out the request.
4--The speaker's degree of right in issuing the request.

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[2]No cultural adjustments were needed for any these five situations.

5--The estimated degree of difficulty the speaker had in making the request.
6--The estimated likelihood of compliance on the part of the hearer.

The analysis of the data has taken into consideration only the **head act**--the unit that by itself may realize the request. The strategies used by the informants have then been codified according to their level of directness, i.e. degree in which the illocutionary intent is apparent in the request. The data have first been classified into the nine levels of directness established by the **CCSARP** and then into three levels--**(a) impositives; (b) conventionally indirect; (c)hints,** following the simplification adopted by Blum-Kulka and House (1989).

Two other aspects have been taken into account in the analysis. The first refers to **internal modifiers** (downgraders and upgraders) which affect the imposition of the act, either softening or intensifying it. The second refers to **perspective**, another dimension in which the head act may also vary and that affects the social meaning of the act. Because requests are impositive acts which threaten the addressee's face and, to a certain extent, the speaker's, the choice of perspective -- speaker's; addressee's; both or impersonal -- may influence the imposition expressed in the act.

ANALYSIS

PORTUGUESE

Preferences and distribution

In relation to Portuguese, the major preference revealed in the data is for the use of conventionally indirect strategies, what represents 64.5% of the answers, (while in English this choice corresponds to 82.4%) and almost exclusively of the preparatory kind. From these, 75.7% are phrased with verb "poder" (can) and 12.8% with verb "dar" (meaning something like: "is it possible that ...") as in "Dá para vocês me darem uma carona?", i. e. "Is it possible for you to give me a ride?".

Coming second in the preferences of Brazilian speakers of Portuguese we find impositive strategies: 32.5% of the total (while in English this choice corresponds to only 9.8%). From the five kinds of more direct strategies the preferential is that with the imperative form (60.7%).

The choice for unconventionally indirect strategies or hints has not been a preference of the informants, only 3.0% of the total number of requests. Weizman (1989) argues that hints are inherently opaque and that the necessary process for their interpretation is not simple for it depends more on contextual knowledge than on the understanding of the utterance. Also, as the instrument for collecting data has been a discourse completion test it may have influenced the informants in terms of not using so indirect strategies as hints.

In terms of distribution , there is a predominance of conventionally indirect strategies in four of the five pairs of situations and the explanation may rest in the configuration of the context of these situations. Blum-Kulka and House (1989) refer to "context internal factors"-- kind of request, degree of imposition, and degree of compliance -- and to "context external factors"-- social distance, social power, participants' rights and obligations. Co-acting in a relative way, these factors create a certain total context which comes to influence the option for a specific kind of strategy and a certain linguistic form within it. As the four pairs of situations where conventionally indirect strategies predominated all placed the requester in the position of asking a favor to people they barely knew, formulating a request in which the degree of imposition could be considered high and the probablility of compliance rather uncertain, the choice for more indirect forms of requesting is well explained. On the other hand, the pair of situations in which the requester's degree of power relative to the addressee is high and the request totally justifiable has presented a smaller number of conventionally indirect requests and a larger number of more impositive requests.

Differently from the other two groups, the distribution of hints does not follow any pattern, that is, there is no link between the choice of the strategy and the social configuration of

the given situation.

About internal modifiers

Syntactic Downgraders

A) Interrogative form

In Portuguese, as in other languages, a declarative sentence as "Podes me dar uma carona" (You can give me a ride) may be understood as a suggestion but not so much as a request. However, the same sentence when interrogative undoubtedly becomes a request. Thus if the speaker's wish is to make a request and the strategy chosen for this purpose is of the preparatory kind, as in the example above, then the utterance will logically be interrogative. In cases like this, the interrogative form cannot be considered as a syntactic device for downgrading the imposition of the request. Nevertheless, if the speaker chooses declarative sentences as "Tu vais ao banco para mim" (You are going to the bank for me) or "Me empresta teu caderno" (Lend me your notebook) which are highly impositive requests but he utters them as questions, then this syntactic device has indeed a downgrading effect. In Portuguese, in the case of the examples given, the change from declarative to interrogative is solely made through intonation and this softening device is quite frequent as the data have shown, 53.1%. The downgrading quality of the question seems to derive from the option given to the addressee of accepting or denying the request. It also minimizes the control the speaker may have over the act he is realizing.

B) Negation of a preparatory condition

If we think of a request of the preparatory kind in its positive version "Podes me dar uma carona?" (Can you give me a ride?) or in its negative version "Não podes me dar uma carona?" (Can't you give me a ride?) and we have to decide which version sounds more polite we face a difficult question and divergent opinions. What is the pragmatic function of negation in this kind of request?

The CCSARP Coding Manual presents the negation of a preparatory condition in requests as having the socio-pragmatic role of downgrading the cohersive level of the request. Although the question of negation is not analysed in depth it is pointed out the fact that, when showing a pessimistic view in relation to the compliance of the request, the speaker is downgrading its imposition.

On the other hand, if we consider the question of what is presupposed in both versions, positive and negative, we can imagine negation as having the role of intensifying the cohersive level of the act. In "Podes me dar uma carona?" (Can you give me a ride?) there is no presupposition, there is simply the question whether the addressee has or not the possibility of giving the ride. However, in "Não podes me dar uma carona?" (Can't you give me a ride?) there is the presupposition that the addressee may not be able to give the ride, nevertheless the request is made. Can we then consider this negative version more polite than the positive one?

In an informal way, I asked several native speakers of Portuguese which version they thought sounded more polite and the answers were divergent and also pointed out that much depended on the context and intonation in which the request was made.

The informants of this research, on their turn, have used negation in a very low percentage, only 2.7% of all requests of the preparatory kind. So being, although the question is important and intriguing, this paper does not go further into its discussion.

C)Tense

Past tense forms can only be considered as downgrading devices if they are used as substitutes of present tense forms without changing the semantic meaning of the utterance. In the data there are two verb tenses which soften the imposition of the requests. One of them -- "imperfeito do indicativo" (imperfect of the indicative)-- when replacing the present tense makes the request sound more polite and because of that it is also called "imperfeito de cortesia"

(politeness imperfect). When making use of this tense, the speaker, according to Travaglia (1987), moves away from reality/present aiming not to constrain his interlocutor as would be the case if the request had been made in the present tense.

The other tense, "futuro do pretérito" (future in the past), has its polite appeal not from a move away from reality but from its tone of probability. When the speaker uses a form as "poderias ir" ou "irias" (would you go), Travaglia argues he is treating his own request as a "hypothesis, a possibility which may perfectly be questioned by the addressee" and the latter may feel more at ease to comply or not to the request.

We can identify the politeness factor of verbal tenses as coming from these two different sources -- distance in time and hypothetical treatment -- however, we can also suggest a possible combination of the two. If we consider, as native speakers of Portuguese do, the future in the past even more polite than the imperfect, we are indicating that a request with "poderias" (would you) contains both qualities that render it more polite: distance in time and hypothetical treatment.

From the three kinds of syntactic downgraders the verb tenses mentioned above have proved the most salient in the data--they appear in 65.6% of all conventionally indirect requests.

Lexical and Phrasal Downgraders

A) Politeness markers

A varied number of politeness markers have been found in the data. These range from the common "por favor" (please) to a series of its variations. However, they are used in only 14.5% of all requests and they are concentrated mostly in the pair of situations which has the greatest number of impositive requests. A possible explanation seems to be that these markers adjust better or better fulfill their function when they are used together with a more direct strategy. Conventionally indirect strategies are already more polite and can do without the extra downgrading effect.

B) Understaters

Differently from the politeness markers, the understaters appear mostly in the situation where the requester finds himself in disadvantage in relation to the addressee. They come in the form "uns minutos" (a few minutes) and other variations. It has also been observed a certain preference for diminutives with the same function and an extra softening quality added to the understater. According to Wierzbicka (1985) the systems of expressive derivation are very rich in some cultures and they involve not only nouns but also adjectives and adverbs. Although Wierzbicka was referring to Slavic and Mediterranean cultures, the interaction between the diminutive form and the speech act applies to Brazilian Portuguese as well. The suffix "inho" for example shows affection and when used as an extra element in the phrasing of a request it has the quality of downgrading its impact.

Upgraders

Two kinds of elements have been used to intensify the imposition of the requests. The first are time intensifiers such as "já" (this minute) or "imediatamente" (immediately), all of them referring to the immediacy in which the act requested has to be carried out. The second are lexical choices which reinforce the negative connotation of one element of the proposition such as "trecos" and "tralhas" (trash).

About perspective

Perspective has been the last source of variation analysed. A significant preference was given to hearer-oriented requests, 82.7%, and this predominates in all but two of the ten situations. In these, the speaker is either asking to use a neighbor's telephone or an office-mate's typewriter. Interestingly both situations have been assessed by the informants, in the longer version of this investigation, as those in which the requester has the lowest degree of dominance relative to the

Summing up, the data from Portuguese native-speakers have proved sensitive to situational variation: situations which required more tact had their requests preferentially realized through conventionally indirect strategies. In situations where the speaker's face was not severely threatened, either because of his social status relative to the hearer or because of the justifiable nature of the request itself, the strategies chosen were the most direct ones. Also more impositive requests have been softened by the use of downgraders and conventionally indirect ones have become more polite through the use of verb tenses other than the present.

EFL

The comments on the results of the analysis of the EFL data will be briefer since most aspects discussed in relation to Portuguese are also true here, the exception being the comments on the use of diminutives.

Conventionally indirect strategies are preferred and those of the preparatory kind represent 77.2% of the total. Among them, the form "could you" is preferential.

Impositive strategies correspond to 22.0% of the total and the most used is that with the imperative.

Hints are used in less than 1.0% of the requests made by learners. In all five languages investigated by Blum-Kulka and House (1989) the incidence of hints is very low. I believe not only the elaborate processing required but also cultural aspects unknown to foreign learners have contributed to this result.

In terms of distribution, there is a clear preference for conventionally indirect strategies in all situations.

About internal modifiers

Syntactic downgraders

The interrogative form in the EFL data has only been used in requests of the preparatory kind whose question form is unmarked, not optional and so cannot be considered as a downgrader.

As for the negation of a preparatory condition, the data collected presented only two requests which used this device and therefore discussion here proves unjustified.

Only the use of tense deserves some comments. The preference is for "could" as past form of "can". A combination of past tense plus aspect has also been observed in forms such as "I was wandering if...", where not only distance in time is offered but also the idea that the activity is or was in progress, i. e., not finished, incomplete. The more polite effect obtained here may probably come from the suggestion of something not yet finished and that can be altered which is transmitted to the hearer.

Lexical and phrasal downgraders

A) Politeness markers

"Please" is the only politeness marker present in the data and is used in 23.0% of all requests and mostly in situations where impositive forms have been preferential. In the data from native speakers of English, this same marker has been used in 26.5% of the requests and in the

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[3]The longer version of this paper, which includes the assessment of six social parameters in the requests situations in order to define to what extent they correlate with indirectness, was written in 1990 as requirement for obtaining an M. A. degree.

same situations.[4] 6

B) Understaters

Phrases such as "a few minutes", "a moment" and "a little" appear in a small number of requests.

Intensifiers

The only examples found in the EFL data are of those intensifiers related to time. Expressions such as "now" and "right now" are present in requests made in situations where the speaker is in a position of command.

Perspective

What is significant here is the percentage of one hundred for the perspective of the hearer in three of the five pairs of situations. The other two pairs show 57.5% of requests from the point of view of the speaker. Most interesting is that these results are very close to those of the native speakers. That is, the English informants used hearer oriented perspective for three out of five situations and 69.0% speaker oriented perspective for the other two situations. Those situations in which a greater dominance of the requester relative to the hearer is attributed are also those in which the perspective of the latter predominates.

ENGLISH, PORTUGUESE and EFL

Blum-Kulka and House's 1989 study of five languages revealed "high levels of cross-cultural agreement for trends of situational variation" and "cross-cultural variation in choices of directness levels within some situations".[5] The present study has revealed that Portuguese agrees with all the other languages that in certain situations a determined level of directness is more appropriate than others, but it has also shown variation relative to the other languages in terms of the specific proportion of these directness levels in certain situations. In addition, the investigation proved Portuguese to be closer to the other four languages and more distant from English.

Considering the distribution of strategy type by Portuguese and English we have:

a-- as for the use of impositive strategies, while Portuguese varies from 3.7% to 70.0%, English only varies from 2.7% to 26.6%, proving to be a language that little privileges the more direct strategies when requesting;

b-- as for the use of conventionally indirect strategies, while Portuguese varies from 27.5% to 80.0%, English goes from 59.0% to 96.9%;

c-- as for the use of hints, there is less variation and also very low percentages, and in this case,differently from the other two, there is no pattern that any of the languages follows.

In short, Portuguese speakers and English speakers, although they agree that some situations require a certain kind of strategy, have shown very little agreement in what concerns the proportion of these strategies in given situations.

The main goal of this study has been to establish to what extent learners of English, when requesting, follow the patterns of their L1 or those of the target language. What the data revealed is that EFL learners fit into an intermediate position between Portuguese and English when using more direct strategies and are closer to English when using conventionally indirect ones.

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[4]The data from native speakers of English have kindly been sent to me by Shoshana Blum-Kulka.

[5]The languages investigated by Blum-Kulka and House (1989) are Hebrew, Canadian French, Argentinian Spanish, German and Australian English.

Learners also proved to be sensitive to the social context of the situations. According to Blum-Kulka (1982), such sensitiveness, however, is probably due to the pragmatic component of the communicative competence of the speaker of any language since certain aspects of the rules which govern the use of language in context are not specific of one or other language.

The question that remains is why do learners adjust better to the patterns of the TL when of the distribution of conventionally indirect strategies. In the case of impositives there is, first of all, the direct interference of the L1; second, there is the fact that the use of the imperative form, the most transparent and direct way of getting someone to do something, is easily learned; and third, the difference of variation between Portuguese and English is greater in relation to impositives (42.4) than in relation to the use of conventionally indirect (23.3). The exaggerate use of impositives by learners reveals itself as a socio-pragmatic failure, learners show they do not yet deal proficiently with the restrictions of the TL in this respect. We may assume that the fact that Portuguese possesses the use of an *interrogative imperative*, much favoured by its speakers when requesting, may lead EFL learners to use this very direct form and thus distance themselves from the TL norm.

However, in the case of conventionally indirect strategies learners are closer to the TL than to L1. Here too, Portuguese and English share the same variety of linguistic forms which have been preferential to all informants, i. e., "podes/poderias" and "can/could".

There are three hypotheses that may explain this proximity between learners and native speakers of English. First, as mentioned before, both native and target language possess and use extensively linguistic forms like "can/could" which contain reference to a "preparatory condition" (Searle,1975) necessary for the request to be realized. Second, the familiarity learners present with these forms may also come from their multiple use in expressing: permission, offers, abilities, possibility and advice. This multiplicity permits learners, when communicating in English, constant use of these forms. Third, comes the emphasis given to these forms in text books. Not only several units refer to the use of "can" and "could" for requesting, but also social and situational aspects and aspects of politeness are highlightened. On the other hand, very little is said about the restricted use of impositive forms of requesting.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

I would like to believe this paper, by investigating Brazilian Portuguese, has gone a little further in the direction pointed out by the **Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project,** but there is still much to be done in this area not only including studies on other languages but also investigating with data collected spontaneously.

As a language tutor , I believe there is a great necessity of studies which investigate speech acts cross-culturally, aiming at a better understanding of cultural differences. These would prove relevant not only for a better habilitation of foreign language teachers but also to help learners to use the foreign language properly not just by copying patterns but by using them knowledgeably, I mean, knowing how and when to say what to whom; a fine tuning of the pragmatic awareness, as Thomas so properly pointed out in 1983.

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